

THE SAND KINGS OF OMAN

186 inhabited the mountain caves long before the present Arabs, who
 563 are mostly farmers and fishermen, came to live in the valleys and
 date plantations. It is said by some (he added) that they are des-
 cendants of Sinbad, the sailor hero of the *Arabian Nights*, who was
 born at Zubair, near Basra, where the Euphrates joins forces with
 the Shatt-al-Arab river. In these mountains the fabulous Giant
 Roc, *rukḥ* in Arabic, is said to have had a lair from which he would
 carry gold and precious stones, as well as pearls, to his island fortress
 near Aden.

'It was probably nothing more than a *na'qr* (eagle),' broke in the
 Khan Sahib with a chuckle, but Ali would have none of this.

'No, Sahib, it was a giant bird with a spread of wings that
 shadowed the land for miles and struck fear into the hearts of men,'
 he said, uttering a '*Bismillah*' to protect himself from evil.

'Tush!' said the Khan Sahib. 'Then it was a *na'sir* (vulture)',
 and Ali, thus affronted, fell into a sulky silence and puffed away at
 his pipe, and we did not hear more of his stories that night.

352 The Khan Sahib began to yawn sleepily and presently asked us if
 354 we were ready to retire. He conducted us along a white-walled
 357 gallery to our sleeping quarters, a low-ceilinged room containing
 half a dozen charpoyas and a brazier of smouldering charcoal.
 Feeling drowsy, we undressed quickly and were soon half asleep.
 Outside the veranda a watchman chanted songs of praise to Allah;
 a pai dog bayed at the moon, and the fronded leaves of the palms
 whispered secrets to the night.